

Haruhi Theater Act I

Translated by Stratos

To my utter amazement, I had no idea what to make of the present circumstances. Any person with human emotion would be able to sympathize with my situation and feeling of exhaustion. And they would say the same thing I would.

"What's going on here?"

"Did you say something?"

Next to me was Haruhi with a smile looking quite out of place in this situation. A smile expressing pleasure bordering on the side of evil which hints at her intention to ignore common sense and charge head-on into whatever may come. Once she has that smile on her face, the rest of us have no choice but to follow this reckless girl wherever she may go. I can only pray that we aren't headed for the student guidance office or prep school class for people who didn't get into college.

But yeah, now isn't the time to be praying.

"I didn't say anything. Actually, I'd rather not say anything for a while."

That was all I had to offer.

"I see. Then keep quiet. Leave this to me. You can be one of the side characters. You're not meant for these kinds of negotiations anyway."

I would rather she not arbitrarily decide what I should and shouldn't do with my life, but for now, I clamped my mouth shut like a clam. Of course, I wasn't sure who I should be talking to or what I should be saying, so I would like to avoid worsening the situation by opening my mouth randomly and saying the wrong thing. Besides, anyone else who found himself suddenly thrust into this position would feel the same way.

Yes, you would, if you were suddenly dragged into the throne room of some castle in the middle of who knows where and found yourself before some stout old guy who looks like a king sitting on his throne.

"O brave hero Haruhi."

The old guy who looked like the King of Diamonds said in a heavy, deep voice.

"Salvation for this world can only be delivered by one born as a hero, carrying the blood of the great heroes of legend passed down through the ages. You are our only hope. Please heed my

request and slay the evil demon lord who attempts to employ fear and disaster to take over this beautiful world."

"Say, old timer."

Haruhi casually said to the king guy who some genuflecting old minister-looking geezer had addressed as "Majesty."

It would appear that the medieval practice of absolute monarchical rule was imposed in this place, but perhaps this kingdom doesn't follow lese majesty since I was left waiting for guards to come throw Haruhi into the dungeon. Though, make sure to put her in a cell by herself. I don't want to join her.

And while I'm at it, Nagato, Asahina-san, and Koizumi probably don't want to join her either. I'm hoping the fact that we're all standing here in a line isn't going to get the rest of tied up because we're associated with her.

"Save the world, is it? Well, it's not that I don't want to do it. I'm of the mind that any request directed towards me is a reasonable request. My compliments. You have good sense in selecting people. My people and I can take care of any request instantly. We have a long list of exploits to prove it."

That speech was so full of bull that I wish someone could just delete it on the spot. Pretend it never happened.

On my left, Haruhi stood with exemplary posture and authority before thrusting her right index finger at the king on this throne with a snap.

"But you know, work should be adequately compensated. What do I get out of beating up that demon lord or whatever that's got a bad case of world domination fever? I have a feeling that conquering the world really just means that somebody else ends up with the tax revenue."

She sounds like a pro. I shifted my eyes from her lively face and casually surveyed her costume.

O brave hero Haruhi—. Normally, if some fool addressed her like that, I would have to call an ambulance and get that poor guy out of there immediately. But in this case, that seems out of the question. For Haruhi's current attire, no matter how much you pick at it, is quite befitting of a "hero." Picture in your mind the costume of a hero that would appear in any RPG based in a western medieval setting. I'm pretty sure it'll be close enough. That is what Haruhi is currently garbed in.

"Hear me, o brave hero Haruhi."

He should just chase us out of the castle already. But apparently, the king intends to take her seriously.

"In the event that the evil demon lord is vanquished and peace brought to this world, your name will be lauded as a hero's to the ends of the earth. Do you mean to say that such glory is unsatisfactory?"

"Well, yeah."

Haruhi flicked her finger across her nose.

"A medal of honor won't put food on the table. Best I could manage would be to auction it off."

"O brave hero Haruhi. I offer my daughter, the princess's hand in marriage—"

"I don't need any princesses."

"—then how about the prince's hand in marriage and joint rulership? However, my children, the prince and princess, have both been kidnapped by the demon lord. They have been confined in the demon lord's castle. We can discuss this further after you've rescued them."

"I said I don't need them."

You can hear the wrath building in her voice.

"If you think I'm going to be impressed by the chance to marry some weird person, I'll tell you right up front. You are sadly mistaken! How mistaken? Let's say you overlooked a question on a scantron sheet, filled in all the answers while off by one question, and turned it in without realizing it. That's how far off you are! And it's not just a practice exam. It's the real thing!"

Haruhi finished her emphatic outburst and leaned over towards my ear.

"Say, Kyon. Why don't we start a rebellion and topple this regime? I'm pretty sure this old timer will abdicate if we threaten to stab him with a sword once or twice. Or if you want, I'd be willing to put you on the throne."

Do it yourself if you want to. I have no interest in rebelling, toppling regimes or taking the throne. I want to live a peaceful, uneventful life in some corner of the world. I'm sure the rest of us, not counting Haruhi, feel the same way.

And so, I avoided Haruhi's eyes and turned to face the opposite direction. What I saw there was a sight so very lovely. I could probably bear a week of agony as long as I had Asahina-san's blank, hallowed face to satiate my eyes on.

"Ah."

Asahina-san noticed me looking at her and her previously look of disorientation was replaced by a gentle smile. She shyly spread her arms out. But it wasn't body language for "You can come sweep me into your arms."

"Does this look good on me?"

That goes without saying. If any article of clothing were to look bad on Asahina-san, it would be the clothing's fault, never the model's fault. Such an article of clothing can be used as fuel for the fire on a cold night in a mountain cabin.

"You look exactly like a mage. Nobody could mistake you for anything else."

I was feeling that I should keep my words of praise simple, and so, I conveyed my flood of emotions in two sentences. I know my message got through. Asahina-san's smile grew wider.

"You also look quite good in yours, Kyon-kun."

"Why thank you," I said as a smile grew on my face. Though I was rather torn about whether I should actually be happy about the compliment. There's nothing fun about looking good when dressed up in some costume I have no interest in. As I struggled for a way to settle this matter, Mr. King of Diamonds, probably tired of verbally sparring with Haruhi, spoke.

"O warrior Kyon."

Now it's my turn.

"What have you? Save this world, and receive the princess's hand in marriage and the right to be the next ruler of this kingdom."

—Warrior. Looks like that was my role here. I'm wearing armor and even have this sword at my waist, so yeah, I'm probably a warrior. At least I look like one. Incidentally, my experience with swords would be limited to waving a wooden sword around in gym class during middle school, but I guess that doesn't matter.

"I may be singing my own praises, but the princess is a beauty to behold," said His Majesty, whose blind parental instinct to fawn over children had started to kick in. "She shone by placing at the top of the World's Top 100 Young Beauties last year. Even she hadn't been taken by the demon lord, she could have been the back-to-back champion this year."

"Really now."

I responded shortly. This princess might be worth having a look at. But to be honest, I found it hard to believe that a girl I have yet to meet could be cuter than Asahina-san, more active than Haruhi, and more useful than Nagato. My heart can no longer be swayed so easily.

Besides, if I were to nod here, I would suffer judgment at the hands of the hero before the demon lord could ever get to me. That scene of the future popped up like a soap bubble floating about ten centimeters before my face before disappearing.

"He sure is a persistent king."

Thought I could hear Haruhi grumbling.

"This is totally not enough money for covering travel expenses. Don't be stingy and haggle about fee on completion. Just give us as much as possible. Let's see. 99999 gold should do it."

That might work if they use paper currency here, but if it's in coinage, it'll probably weigh a ton. And who gets to walk around with a treasure chest strapped to his back? Not that I say any of this out loud. That would be dumb. Just take his crown. You can probably sell it for money somewhere.

Haruhi went on to shoot out questions about floating exchange rates and whether or not they used a gold standard, request an military escort of ten thousand cavalry and fifty thousand foot, and make other unreasonable demands which only served to put perplexed expressions on the faces of His Majesty and the minister.

I get the feeling this is going to take a while, so I'll use this time to briefly describe the garb of the remaining two people.

Nagato is a thief. Koizumi is a bard holding a harp. The end. There's no need to explain any further. They look the part.

Nagato's unmoving stare is directed intently at the opposite stone wall. Koizumi had that painfully artificial, easy smile plastered on his face as he calmly watched Haruhi talk. I'm quite relieved that I wasn't the one who had to wear Koizumi's costume. It looked so perfect on Koizumi it was depressing.

The party consisted of these five members. Or to things easier, it's just the usual group. Just that Haruhi's armband says hero instead of brigade chief. I am her companion warrior. Then there's the mage Asahina-san, and the thief is Nagato. Koizumi plays a bard. It's a pretty awful casting job. Almost like they accidentally put these characters into the wrong story during the development stage.

Haruhi and His Majesty, the King of Diamonds, were still engaged in their foolish dispute, which gave me time to grasp the situation in this world. The root of the problem is this evil demon lord who came out of nowhere and happens to be considered extremely evil by the ruling class of this nation. The demon's also a kidnapper so they want us to go on a little adventure per se. So it's basically an RPG. And a pretty bad one to boot.

"Well, then."

I said as I tried lifting the sword at my waist. I'm not exactly sure what I'll be fighting against, but I'd rather not be put in a situation where I have to use this thing. We aren't too good with that savage and serious stuff.

The long negotiations finally came to a close. Just as I thought. The treasure chests packed tightly with coins were being carried by Nagato and Koizumi, and yours truly. An uninformed observer wouldn't view us as a party of heroes. More like a bunch of shameless thieves. But the chests were so heavy that I had no chance to ponder the issue further. I should have grown used to carrying things around by now, but a wooden chest stuffed full of coins was in fact heavier than most things I've carried lately. I think it weighs even more than Haruhi. If there was a practice of assigning points by weight, the treasure chest would win hands down.

"A so-so way to start. Let's keep this pace up to the end."

With Haruhi rapidly leading the way, the rest of us huffed and puffed as we followed in her footsteps. Or it's just me doing the huffing and puffing. Nagato and Koizumi seem to be having no trouble carrying their load. Nagato, I can understand, but I just can't seem to stomach the idea of Koizumi having that much strength. Did you secretly do some weight training, you bastard? Invite me along next time.

It goes without saying, but Asahina-san wasn't carrying any extra weight. All she carried was a gnarled wooden staff. Apparently that's her magical item. I'm not really sure though. And as for what kind of magic this Asahina-san is able to use? That matter goes beyond the level of simple query and into the realms of unsolved mystery. I really hope that it doesn't have something to do with trivial knowledge like a new way to brew better tasting tea...

"First, we should fill our stomachs. Order whatever you like. We've got a sizable battle chest now. Let's get this started with a bang!"

Haruhi stopped in front of a wooden two-story structure with a signboard carved from wood saying something Hostel. A number of horses are tied up by the roadside. They stare at the five of us with tired-looking eyes. It would appear that holding a sharp outlook on the world is the standard here.

"But man, this village sure is hard to match to a time period."

I clanked around in my armor as I looked around our surroundings.

This city is located right outside the castle. It seems to be around the level of civilization of Europe during the Hundred Years' War, at least it has that sort of atmosphere. Of course, I wouldn't be familiar with the customs of that time, so I can't really say for sure. The people walking by are garbed in clothing I've only seen in fantasy role playing games. Or to make it easier for you, just picture a world with "sword and magic" to speed things up. If you keep that in mind, I can cut down on unnecessary explanation, which would be a big help.

And while I was explaining the scene to the best of my descriptive abilities, Haruhi had already opened the door to what appeared to be a tavern.

"Hey!"

She shouted in a cheerful voice. Every person in the place turned to look at her. The patrons here look rather seedy. A bunch of blue collar middle-aged men with the stench of ruffians, faces buried in their tankards in the middle of the day. I've already grasped the employment situation for this country. The eyes focused on the treasure chest I'm carrying are making me very uneasy. I was starting to want to go cower behind Nagato.

But that didn't last long.

"Today's patrons are in luck! I'll be paying for everything you eat and drink. My treat, my treat. No need to worry about money. The king is paying for this."

Her shouting settled the matter. A roaring cheer shook the flimsy wooden walls, and the tavern went into party mode.

"Where's the owner? Let's start off with every food and drink item on your menu. Five of each!"

Haruhi stomped to a table near the back, and a bearded guy came out to take her massive order. She then turned back.

"What are you doing, Kyon!? And everyone else! Come sit down. We're celebrating in advance, in advance!"

What is going to happen that warrants advance celebration? My question was met with a contested absence of response that disintegrated into thin air.

"..."

As I stood motionless, Nagato, playing the role of thief, silently passed me, carrying her treasure chest.

"Wow... Something smells really good."

Asahina-san sniffed the air with her finely shaped nose.

"Wakya!"

She tripped over the hem of her cloak and fell on her face.

"In any case, Suzumiya-san is quite generous. But the money came from the kingdom's treasury to begin with, so returning it to the people would be best, right?"

Koizumi helped Asahina-san up and smiled at me. He has the usual laid-back grinning look on his face. Nagato's face is expressionless, and Asahina-san's innocent clumsiness is no different from how she is in the clubroom. Haruhi's hyper power seems to have increased for no real

reason. I would be the only one left feeling clueless. Everybody else looks completely at ease in this situation.

"Whoa, this is delicious! What kind of meat is it? Mammoth? I've never tasted anything like this before. Tell me the ingredients and recipe later."

Plate after plate was being delivered to our table, and Haruhi was already smacking her lips.

"How can you call yourself a hero?"

I muttered after dropping my treasure chest to the floor.

The first thing she does upon leaving the castle after accepting a request to slay a demon lord is hop into a tavern and waste the battle chest we'd been lucky to receive instead of spending it on equipment and items. What kind of a hero would do that?

"Kyon, get over here already! This low-malt beer is kind of strong, but it's pretty good! I'll finish it all if you don't hurry it up!"

Haruhi yelled at me as she waved the ceramic mug around. Can't be helped. That mockery of a hero is our leader. And the argument would be that unless a command of revolution has been decreed, a poor warrior can't afford to alienate himself in this situation. I wouldn't know where to go by myself.

The hero's party moved to occupy a table, so I moved from my spot.

I don't know how much time passed. I had no watch on. The whole tavern was still filled with merrymaking.

Haruhi had grown quite fond of that low-malt beer, which reminded me of unrefined sake, and would wave for a refill every time she drained her tankard. Now, she and some old guy from the next table are singing some weird song with their arms around each other's shoulders.

Next to them is Nagato, who's silently scoffing every unrecognizable dish being carried from the back. I was starting to wonder if this tavern had an infinite supply of food. But the seemingly infinite volume of Nagato's stomach is what's really suspect. Where is she putting all that stuff?

I hear a cascade of sound and turn to look. Koizumi, seated in a chair up against the wall, was playing his harp, surrounded by a number of the town girls. Those girls were looking at Koizumi the way innocent maidens would gaze at Apollo after he descended to earth, putting me in a foul mood.

Well, I don't really care. I have Asahina-san. Or I'm just saying that to console myself. For Asahina-san wasn't anywhere near me right now. As for where she was...

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Was this what you ordered? Ah, yes. I'll bring yours right away!"

For some unknown reason, she had turned into a waitress for this tavern and was busily running from table to table. I believe that the tankard Haruhi forced on her would be to blame. She happily ran between kitchen and tables with slightly flushed cheeks.

"Hey, Koizumi."

I was getting pretty sick of sitting and eating in silence. And the fact that I had already eaten my fill didn't help much. I called to the makeshift bard, singing and playing his harp like a wandering musician.

Koizumi walked over, basking in the enthralled looks of adoration from the town girls behind him.

"What is the matter, warrior Kyon? Do you find fault with our current situation?"

Of course, I do. This isn't the time to be enjoying ourselves.

"Indeed. We must make haste to defeat the demon lord. But taking an extra day or two should be permissible."

Not that. We have something else to deal with first.

"Where are we?" I asked. "What's with this RPG-like world? Why are we in this place? Who brought us here?"

Koizumi showed his sickeningly white teeth. They look like they've been bleached.

"Actually, I'm not sure either. Before I knew it, I found myself in that throne room. I assume you had a similar experience. My memories leading up to that point are rather hazy. Do you remember anything?"

I can't remember. That's why I'm worried. What was I doing where before I found myself before the king?

Koizumi spoke with harp in one hand.

"It may just be my imagination," he said by way of excuse, "but I have this faint feeling that we were playing a game in the clubroom. It might have been a tabletop RPG. Or perhaps an online game using the computer."

I grimaced. Now that he mentions it, I vaguely recall something along those lines. But they don't feel like my memories. We were supposed to be playing a game, but then we jumped into the game world—as if. I refuse to simply believe such a cheap explanation.

"Asahina-san."

I called to the cloaked serving girl hard at work.

"Coming!"

Asahina-san trotted over carrying a tray.

"Your order?"

That's not why I called you over. I would have liked to ask her if she was supposed to be role-playing a mage or a maid, but...

"What is going on here?" I ask, raising my sword. "Haruhi's a hero, and we're supposed to slay a demon lord or something. How did we end up in this place?"

"Huh?"

Asahina-san's lovely eyes opened wide.

"Isn't this a theme park attraction?"

News to me.

"Um... I thought we all went to this place that looked like an amusement park and entered what looked like a mansion... Weren't we supposed to thoroughly assume our role and go on an adventure?"

I turned to Koizumi for advice. But Koizumi was stroking his chin, deep in thought.

"This situation feels a bit too real for that explanation to fly. I find it hard to believe that the castle and this tavern are fake and all of the people here are just extras. Furthermore, I do not recall any of that ever happening."

Same here. I don't remember playing any games, and I don't remember going in any amusement parks.

"Huh?" Asahina-san gracefully placed a hand against her cheek. "Now I seem to remember being a mage to begin with... Huh? That's strange... The SOS Brigade... Suzumiya-san is a hero and Kyon-kun is a warrior... Huh—?"

I sigh. If the world has to depend on Haruhi to be the hero, they must have an abnormal shortage of talent. You could probably find better heroes at an unemployment office.

"Asahina-san, can you use magic?"

I ask, grasping at straws. Asahina-san replies confidently.

"I can—. Do you want me to show you? See, this spell makes my ears bigger..."

She began her demonstration.

"This spell is for moving a cigarette through a hundred yen coin. There! There!"

I'm so touched that I'm tearing up. You're mistaken, Asahina-san. That isn't magic... Well, I guess in the English language, you would call this magic.

"Huh? It's not working. Ah, I could do it in practice. One more time."

No, it's okay. You did very well.

I'm about to smack myself in the forehead when I hear a voice from another table requesting service. Without a moment's delay, she responds, "Ah. Coming, coming!" As parlor trick magician Asahina-san hurriedly rushes off, she tripped over her cloak and fell down.

"Hya!"

In that case, I have no choice but to bring out the ultimate weapon.

"Nagato."

The petite thief silently munching away, cheeks stuffed with food, quietly stood and walked over.

And before I could open my mouth...

"Simulation."

...she said while staring intently at the half-eaten plates before me.

A simulation? Looks like an RPG to me.

"..."

Nagato stood, looking like she was searching for the right words to use. She finally spoke in a disinterested tone.

"I also do not have a clear understanding of the situation. The most likely possibility would be that we are in simulated space."

"So in other words," said Koizumi, "we have been thrown into a separate space removed from reality through some unknown means by some unknown being?"

Nagato nods in affirmation, but her eyes remain fixed on the contents of those plates. I pulled up a chair, motioned for her to sit, and pushed the food towards Nagato before speaking.

"What do you mean by some unknown means by some unknown being? Who's capable of doing something like this?"

"I do not know."

Nagato responds. And without further elaboration, she began silently stuff her mouth with my leftovers. And once she finished eating...

"I sense that conditions for termination have been set."

As I wondered if she had seen my disappointment and only said that for my benefit...

"There should be a trigger to restore the situation."

I suppose there's not need to ask what the trigger is. Looking at our current circumstances, the duty we have to perform right now is...

"Slay the demon lord, am I correct?"

Koizumi said in my place as he elegantly strummed his harp.

And there you have it. We must go slay the demon lord. That takes care of one problem. At least we know what our goal is now. Now we just have to figure out how we're going to do it.

"That's good and all..."

I turned exasperatedly to look at Haruhi. The biggest problem is still unsolved. I shouldn't have to tell you what that would be. The one who always causes us trouble. The troublemaking SOS Brigade brigade chief.

"We're running low on food! Come on, newcomers have to chug three quick ones!"

The party was now on its third day. The only thing we've done during this period is walk between the inn and tavern. We don't know where the demon lord's castle is. We haven't fought any monsters to level up. We haven't done any searching for useful items. We haven't done anything at all.

Haruhi is no hero. She's just being a generous rich person. Asahina-san has become a maid, like it was destiny. Koizumi is improving his harp skills day by day in front of an audience of females watching with misty eyes. Nagato has completely turned into a food fighter.

CM Break!

I began wondering if we weren't actually a hero and her party, but a fake hero and her accomplices. Perhaps somewhere out there is a party of good people with a sense of justice who truly want to help the world, and we're actually just some malicious bunch using their name. I'm quaking in my boots that any minute now, the king will realize his mistake, and his guards will come break down the tavern door and arrest us. Seriously, every time someone walks in, I spin around. And that's why I'm getting stomach pains when I haven't even eaten that much. And now, a new source of stomach pains pushed the door open with a creak. At least I can be relieved that no guards walked in.

It was an old man of indiscernible age. He looked like one of those mythological wisemen with his white hair, white eyebrows, and heavily wrinkled face. He had such a strong presence that I was expecting him to start teaching me about the Force or something. Not sure what went through the old guy's mind, but he turned his sharp eyes to me.

"...So you have yet to leave this place?"

You can express all the disbelief you want. All I can do is capitulate a bit.

The old guy sighed like the winter wind and headed for the table occupied by Haruhi.

"O brave hero Haruhi."

"You need something?"

Haruhi, holding a quick arm wrestling tournament with the boozehounds, glanced up at the suspicious-looking old man.

"It's one gold coin to participate. Winner takes all. If you're fine with that, write your name on the tournament sign up sheet over there."

"Fool."

The old man voiced an ever so accurate sentiment.

"I expected you to be halfway to the demon lord's castle by now, yet you haven't even left the castle? How do you explain yourself? O brave hero Haruhi. The time of destruction is almost upon us. Understand that it is your duty to slay the demon lord before that happens.

"Who's the old timer? He sure sounds full of himself."

"I am," the old man began, straightening up a lot more than one should at his age, "the forest sage. My role is to give you information and guide you down the correct path."

The tavern fell silent. The old sage's thick voice rang increasingly louder.

"Originally, I should have waited for you to come to me, but you never arrived which is why I have come to you now. Listen well, brave hero Haruhi—"

"I get it already."

Get what? Haruhi seemed extremely accepting as she stood up with a smile on her face.

"I was expecting something like this to happen soon. Looks like we've used up our money anyway. Not a bad time to move on to the next place."

When people talk about criminals who knowingly commit wrong, they're talking about people like Haruhi. We've blown the whole battle chest on entertainment expenses. How the are we heroes?

"Good grief."

The forest sage or whatever expressed how I felt.

"Now, come with me, brave hero Haruhi and companions. I must being by guiding you to the first gateway."

Finally, huh? I stood up while shaking my head. Looking over at Koizumi, he was shaking hands with each of the town girls, who seem reluctant to say farewell. Asahina-san was handed a leather pouch by the owner as pay for her work. Nagato was already waiting outside for us.

"Kyon, let's go."

She dragged me by my arm halfway to the entrance before looking back.

"Well, we're off to slay the demon lord. I'll bring plenty of treasures back. We can party more then. Promise!"

The cheers of the tavern patrons boosted Haruhi and me out the door.

Once we left the castle town, we found ourselves on a green prairie. The darker areas are forest. The lighter areas are open plain. It's a simple landscape like they skimped on the graphics.

"Understand?" the forest sage said as he was guiding us along. First, there is a cave in the deepest part of yonder forest. Do not lose heart. There is a treasure chest within the cave. It contains the key to the door to the demon lord's castle.

So go and get it is what you're saying.

"O-kay!"

Haruhi consents the minute the sage finishes.

"Come, everyone. Let's get this over quick. Off we go!"

She instantly ran off. We have no choice but to chase after her. We can't let the hero charge forward by herself.

Behind us, I could vaguely hear the old sage going —"wait" and "I'm not done talking yet"— but Haruhi's speed quickly took us out of hearing range.

After a few minutes of following the straight path through the forest, we reached a cave at the end. It's got the whole suspicious feel to it. Like some vicious monster is guarding a treasure chest inside... well, at least the majority of us would get that feeling, but Haruhi doesn't agree. Our party plunged into the cave at the same pace, and before we were five steps in, we came to a halt.

"Uwa!"

We are in what appears to be an enormous hall. I don't know why, but the walls give off faint light so we aren't in total darkness. Which is why I was able to see something I would rather not have.

"Wah, it's big..."

Asahina-san says, catching her breath.

"Indeed," Koizumi agrees. "How are we supposed to slay this?"

"..."

Nagato was just looking upwards. I'm in the same state. I could only stare wordlessly at the enormous shadow before my eyes.

"Let's see..."

Haruhi rocked her head back and forth.

"This is the first monster we encounter? Doesn't something seem weird here?"

Haruhi voiced her query, sounding like she couldn't be sure if a few screws were loose in her head. You can't blame her for thinking that way.

There was a dragon before us. A ridiculously big one, with an incredibly overpowering presence, that was glaring at us. It would seem that this thing's the master of the cave, the guardian of the treasure.

As we stared, dazed, the huge dragon opened its gaping mouth—...

We could do nothing. One shot of its dragon breath annihilated the party.

"As I was saying..."

The forest sage is frowning at us.

"Listen to everything I have to say. You can't defeat the guardian dragon of the cave at your current level. You must reach the key without engaging in battle.

We are standing at the entrance of the forest. Why are we still alive after being annihilated? That should be rather obvious. Because this is a save point. What other explanation could there be?

"I know already."

Haruhi interrupted the old man, sounding rather aggravated.

"So it's fine as long as we get the key, right? We'll do it right this time."

"As I said, I will tell you how to do—"

"We're good. Just shut up already."

The fire in Haruhi's eyes is probably her desire for vengeance against the dragon.

"I let my guard down earlier. It was one of those ambushes. If we had been ready, there's no way we would have lost to that weakling. We'll smash it up next time!"

And with that said, she ran off again. And we were half-compelled to run after her. I would prefer to move separately from Haruhi, but unfortunately, there was no such option. Honestly, somebody should do something about that.

And so we charged into the cave again, ran into the dragon again, and were showered by its dragon breath. A perfect replay. Naturally, we were annihilated again.

"I told you to listen to what I have to say."

The forest sage's voice sounded tired, but I was even more tired. And Asahina-san is lying on the ground moaning. Koizumi's smile doesn't have its usual knack. Nagato's the only one whose expression hasn't changed.

"Man, I'm getting pissed."

Haruhi was biting her nails in frustration. And her anger didn't end here.

We were annihilated a total of five times. And they were all because Haruhi barged on in without stopping to think. We just rush into the cave, fight with dragon, instantly get hit with dragon breath—just repeated this process five times and ended up with the same result all five times. The next time will be our sixth game over. I'm getting pretty sick of this.

"Haruhi, calm down and listen to what the old guy has to say. At this rate, we'll never make any progress."

Haruhi stuck her nose up with a hmpf and sat down cross-legged. The sage looked relieved.

"Hmm. Allow me to explain then. You must first put the dragon in the cave to sleep. You can then use the opportunity to head to where the key is. In order to put the dragon to sleep..."

He pulled a crystal orb out of his pocket.

"...you must use this 'Orb of Indolence.' However, I will not simply give this to you for free. The years are catching up with me, and my joints have begun aching. There is a grass called 'Gout-out' which grows in the lands to the east which is said to be effective. If you bring me some, I will present the 'Orb of Indolence' to—"

The forest sage stops talking because Haruhi has quickly jumped up and drawn her sword and is currently pointing it at his throat.

"Let's not have this roundabout stuff," Haruhi said smiling like a bandit. "I'll get you your grass later. Just hand over that orb now. Understood? We aren't on any child's errand here. A hero and her valiant companions. Our mission is to save the world. I'll do whatever it takes. We don't have time to waste."

The pitiful old man's mouth was open with astonishment after Haruhi's creepy remarks.

"Move one inch and I'll send to the afterlife. I actually have a strong sense of respect for the elderly. It pains me to do this."

The forest sage was sputtering. I suppose the world wouldn't want to be saved by a hero who extorts items.

"Now, Yuki. Now's your chance to steal it."

Since she's a thief. But we're talking about taking an orb from an old sage with a sword at his throat. I doubt any special skills are needed.

"..."

Nagato made no semblance of being in a hurry. She slowly approached the sage, deftly took the held up 'Orb of Indolence' or whatever, and wordlessly returned to our original position.

"If I have to choose between world destruction and an old guy's rheumatism, I'm sorry to say that the different in priority is quite clear. Can't help it."

Haruhi put up her sword with a satisfied smile on her face.

"Because if the world is destroyed, you won't be worrying about aches or pain anymore. That only matters if you're alive. Don't worry. I won't forget about the medicine."

Then she thrust one arm into the air and spoke fervently like she was commanding the whole world.

"Let's go, Kyon. Everybody. We'll put that dragon to sleep and beat the daylights out of it!"

So that's your real objective.

We could probably hack away at the dragon till the end of time and it still wouldn't feel any pain. Probably wouldn't even feel an itch. Well, at least it stayed sound asleep and never woke up on us.

We successfully obtained the 'Key to Demon Castle Gate' and left the cave to find the sage waiting outside. Guess he hasn't learned his lesson yet. Except he's got this sour look on his face now.

"This will do, right? So then, where's the brainless demon lord that's trying to take over the world? Tell me."

"Ah."

The sage licked his lips. He seems rather reluctant to speak.

"Actually, the key alone will not suffice for taking you to where the demon lord is. Deep within the demon lord's castle at the end of a labyrinth is the "Door of Phantasms" located..."

"Where's the key?" Haruhi asks. The sage looks even more reluctant now.

"If you head north, you'll find a ruined city, underneath which lies a dungeon. The faithful servant of the demon lord, an evil mage has erected an underground palace for the god of darkness. The 'Key of Phantasms' is in his hands... However, his territory is under the influence of the god of darkness, so you will be unable to simply enter. You must bathe in the light of the 'Orb of Consecration' before entering the labyrinth."

"Hmm," Haruhi said with a brilliant smile on her face, urging the old man to continue.

"...The 'Orb of Consecration' is in my possession, but... what can I say, it must be age. My vision has gotten hazy as of late. The remedy for this disorder grows in yonder land far to the west..."

The old man let out a forlorn sigh.

"...and is known as the 'Asthenopia-killer.' If you were to obtain some, I would be more than happy to give you this orb. How about it...?"

I was expecting Haruhi to quickly turn to extortion again, but Haruhi released her grip on her sword.

"Say, are you really a good guy?"

She stared intently at the old man's face.

"Seems fishy. I don't think any old guys say things like "yonder" these days. I'm getting some suspicious vibes here. You wouldn't happen to unexpectedly be the last boss, would you?"

"Wh-What are you saying?"

Haruhi twisted her mouth as she glared at the flustered forest sage.

"Maybe the real sage was killed long ago. You're being kind and telling us about keys and orbs and other information, but this is all just a way to get us to release the last boss after the demon lord. We slay the demon lord and finally get to go on our way home when we hear, "Well done, brave heroes. Thanks to you, the seal placed upon me has been broken. Allow me to thank you," from out of nowhere, then menacing music starts playing in the background, and you make your appearance. It isn't some contrived plot like that, is it?"

The forest sage looked to me for aid. I can only shrug my shoulders. If what Haruhi said is true, this is one random written scenario.

"It isn't..."

The old man's denial lacked conviction.

"Hmm, it shouldn't be. It may have been at one point, but no... it no longer is. No question about it. The demon lord is the last boss. There is nothing afterwards. I am merely a kind, old forest sage."

As if to prove his words, the old man took a crystal orb out of his pocket.

"I can just bear with these ailing eyes of mine. It means naught when compared with the safety of this world. Here, this is the 'Orb of Consecration' I mentioned. Take it, brave hero Haruhi. And also..."

He pulls out another orb.

"This is the 'Orb of Exorcism' which has the ability to temporarily prevent the demon lord from moving. A grass known as the 'Panacea-cide' grows in yonder land far to the south, but that isn't important. This is for the sake of the world. I won't bother you with any tedious requests."

"Thank you."

Haruhi nodded a number of times but didn't extend her hand to take the orb.

"But we don't need that orb. Don't need any complicated keys either. I only need you to tell me one thing."

Haruhi, eyes shining, posed her question to the shocked and speechless sage.

"Where is the demon lord's castle? Just tell us where it is, and we'll figure out the rest ourselves. Yeah, I'm sick of this roundabout stuff already. We just have to slay the demon lord, right? I'll be sure to do that, so tell me where the castle is. Come on, out with it."

"But then," the old man said, dumbfounded, "what will you do? Even if you go to the castle, you currently won't be able to..."

"Doesn't matter."

Haruhi smiled mischievously and turned to us. Haruhi looked at me, then Koizumi, then Nagato, and then Asahina-san in turn.

"I have these amazing companions. I don't need any cunning items. We'll save the world as many times as necessary. I'm sure we can do it."

And then Haruhi smiled so cheerfully she looked demented.

"Because I believe we can do it."

And so—

We have arrived. We probably skipped a bunch of places we were supposed to go to, missed a bunch of necessary items, and haven't even leveled up a single time since we started. But here we are at the final destination.

There is a sense of overwhelming majesty as we stand before the looming demon lord's castle over with thunderclouds in the background. Not only does the place reek of evil, I'm feeling these waves of terror batter my spirit. My instincts were telling me to stay away. Don't take one step closer.

"What do we do, Haruhi?"

I voiced my question to the female hero who was gazing up at the demon castle the way you would gaze at Mt. Fuji.

"We haven't even had a real fight on the way here. This will just be like fighting the dragon. Instant annihilation. I doubt the result will change if we keep trying."

"I would concur.

Oddly enough, Koizumi backs me up. And he's still holding that harp, which hasn't been used since we left the tavern, like it's precious treasure.

"I do not believe we can overcome this foe with a frontal attack. After all, this is a demon lord we're talking about. The interior of the castle is most likely filled with numerous strong monsters and traps. I doubt we would be able to make it to the demon lord's throne room."

"Probably," Haruhi says. Though she doesn't look the slightest bit upset as her smile doesn't fade.

"..."

Nagato says nothing. Just stands there by herself with minimal presence without saying yes or no, like there's a reserved winter flower in our midst.

"It'll be fine."

Haruhi replies confidently before pulling over the cloaked upperclassman, who's scrunched up in a trembling ball.

"We'll have Mikuru-chan take care of it somehow."

"What!?"

Asahina-san threw her head back in surprise as Haruhi put her arms around Asahina-san's shoulders, talking to her the way you would teach a budgerigar to speak.

"Okay? You're a mage. And one strong enough to be included in the hero's party. Which means you can use stronger magic than anyone else in the world. I'm sure of it. confident you can do it. Your potential power should be peerless. We just have to awaken the power in you. Now, Mikuru-chan. Let us release the hidden power within you. Don't hold back. Just beat the crap out of the strong guys. We'll force our way into that dirty castle."

"B-But..."

Asahina-san clenches her cloak nervously as she looks between Haruhi and the demon castle.

"I don't really know much magic... All I know is how to make ears bigger..."

"Have faith in yourself."

In the right time and place, that can be an extremely effective phrase, but Haruhi doesn't care much about time or place. Though I guess that's what makes her Haruhi.

"You can do it, Mikuru-chan. I chose you, so it's certain. You are an amazing girl. You're a cute, sweet, and slightly clumsy mage. Yep, perfect."

She stuck her finger towards the demon castle.

"Now is the time for you to use your Ultimate Mikuru Magic. Are you ready? Now, Mikuru-chan. Anything will do, just cast a spell."

"Y-Yes..."

Asahina-san closed her eyes and faced down. She began chanting something that vaguely sounded like a spell. Haruhi was watching over her the way a shepherd would watch over his flock. As for me, I'm always watching over Asahina-san. I don't know what Koizumi's doing since I'm not bothering to look at him. Though I managed to catch Nagato's eyes suddenly opening wide.

Before I could ask what was wrong—...

A super-dreadnaught level spell via Asahina-san exploded.

"It would appear that two spells, Meteo Burst and Devil Quake, took effect at the same time."

That explanation came from Koizumi.

"I heard about them at the tavern. There are myths concerning those legendary magic spells. Both of those require lost ancient knowledge and a large quantity of magic points to cast, but Asahina-san seems to have broken through those restrictions with ease."

That's way too much limit breaking. There goes the game balance. She can take out everything with one blow now, right?

"What's wrong with that?"

Haruhi's the only one happy about this situation. Her cheerfulness has no bounds. She's looking quite happy about completing the mission.

"Way to go, Mikuru-chan. Not quite what I expected, but in a good way."

The object of Haruhi's praise, Asahina-san, is turning pale after realizing what she has done and looks like she'll be fainting any minute now.

"Awawa... Hii..."

We stood atop a small hill. The surrounding area, including the demon lord's castle and covering about a thirty kilometer radius, is completely barren. Nothing left at all besides this huge, gaping crater.

Asahina-san's final ultimate spell is truly frightening. We would have been vaporized if Nagato hadn't saved us. Seconds before the area around the demon castle became showered by thousands of meteorites and turned into the epicenter for an earthquake, Nagato swiftly picked up all of us with her thin arms, and took off so fast she was practically teleporting, bringing us to the top of this hill. Guess she really is a thief. Quick to run away... This isn't the time for lengthy admiration.

"..."

Nagato didn't even look short on breath. She just stared expressionlessly at the rectangular holes all over the place filled with smoke and flames.

And so the demon lord and his whole castle were turned to ash. And everyone lived happily ever after. The end...? Feels like we're forgetting something.

"Well, let's go home."

Haruhi sure didn't seem to have any reservations considering the satisfied smile of accomplishment on her face.

"Pity about the treasures. Well, can't do anything about what's already gone. We slew the demon lord and saved the world so the king should be satisfied enough. Time for our triumphant return. Need to start planning the victory party pronto."

You shouldn't be the one planning the party. The people casually waiting for our return are supposed to do it. And it shouldn't be held in that tavern, but the palace hall—...

No, wait a second. We shouldn't be going back to the castle. We slew the demon lord. In that case, we should have fulfilled the conditions. An RPG would start playing the ending song about now. And we should be returning to the real world soon.

"Mission complete."

Nagato whispered before turning to look at me with my "what's going on here" expression and speaking in an unconcerned tone.

"It appears a penalty has been assigned..."

I'm even more confused now. I stand up straight as a flagpole when the surrounding landscape suddenly began transforming. The forests and mountains collapse, and the darkness of night quickly fills the sky. Night? Or wait, forget that. The stars aren't twinkling yet increasing in number. In fact, I can see stars in every direction.

"..." was the reaction from Nagato, Koizumi, Asahina-san, and me.

I can only say one thing. Here we go again. I'm feeling the exact same way I felt when first getting mixed up in the fantasy world.

"what's going on here?"

The words slip out of mouth—I'm getting pretty sick of saying it, but I can't think of anything else to say—and before we knew it, we were in outer space. I confirmed that I was gripping what appeared to be a control stick and finally thought to check my surroundings. My eyes come to a stop on Haruhi, Nagato, and Asahina-san dressed whose costume puts me at a loss for words. Their outfits are showing off an awful lot of skin. The three of them were striking enchanting poses.

"Well, well."

Koizumi smiles next to me, having quickly changed from a bard to a spaceship pilot. "So we've been assigned to a space patrol squad this time? Perhaps this is the second stage?"

Don't ask me that. Was this the penalty mentioned after the mission complete? What do we have to do this time?

"Do you read me? Team Haruhi of the Galactic Regional Observation Conclave's Patrol Force."

The deep voice of some old guy started talking from the console before me. It somehow resembled the voice of that king which gave me a really bad feeling about this.

"This is the Fifth Galactic Independent Empire. I am the emperor. Some treacherous space pirates have kidnapped the prince and princess. They seek the destruction of our galaxy. I beg of you. Please crush their evil aspirations and rescue my children."

"O-kay!"

...was Haruhi's instant response.

"If it's just space pirates, we'll do it for free. It's our duty as members of the Galactic Patrol. Relax. We'll take care of everything. We'll definitely save them this time."

Now I get it. That's what we forgot about. Which is why we're now in round two... My reflection was interrupted by Haruhi smacking my back hard. She smiled brighter than any nearby star.

"Let's go, Kyon. We'll follow those evil pirates to the end of the universe!"

Can't be helped. Whether we're headed for the end of the universe or the Ringworld, I can't disobey orders from our captain. Besides, one of the conditions for termination of this scenario appears to be rescuing the prince and princess.

Still, don't tell me we'll have to go through a third round? The next would be a Western with gun slinging—give me a break already.

"Engines to full. Full speed ahead!!!"

I listened to Haruhi shouting in the background as I pushed the control stick a little harder than necessary.

I'll just pray that the next time I come to my senses, I'll find myself drinking tea in the clubroom—.

END